

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN®

- 5 **The Last Reunion** / Michael Gilbert
- 25 **Second Jeopardy** / Clark Howard
- 35 **The Shopping List** / Brian Garfield
- 48 **The Marriage Contract** / Melville Davisson Post
- 67 **The Power of the Tongue** / John F. Suter
- 85 **Honeymoon Home** / Joyce Harrington
- 107 **A Man Around the House** / Nancy Pickard
- 112 **A Fierceness Deep Inside** / William Bankier
- 116 **Playing It Cool** / Simon Brett
- 130 **The Message in the Message** / Jack Ritchie
- 142 **The Theft of the Picture Postcards** / Edward D. Hoch
- 99 **Mystery Newsletter** / R. E. Porter & Chris Steinbrunner
- 103 **The Jury Box** / Jon L. Breen
- 161-162 **Index to Volume 78**

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a **NEW** Henry Turnbuckle story by

JACK RITCHIE

It's almost as if mysteries are waiting in ambush for Henry Turnbuckle wherever he may go. Why, Henry can't walk to the corner newsstand for a paper without bumping into a baffling crime; and by the time he gets back, Henry can have at least three theories and solutions buzzing in his brain. Fancy ones, too . . . Even zester and zanier than usual! It's a strange, strange world that Jack Ritchie conjures up for us . . .

THE MESSAGE IN THE MESSAGE

by **JACK RITCHIE**

Her violet eyes continued to speculate. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Perhaps," I beamed. "If you receive the upstate edition of our newspaper, you may have come across my likeness two years ago. At the ground-breaking ceremonies for the new police gymnasium. I was third from the left, holding the mayor's topcoat."

"No, not that." Then she remembered. "On the university campus ten years or so back. Weren't you the one carrying that long oar over your shoulder?"

Ralph showed interest. "Oar?"

"When did this murder take place?" I asked, changing the subject.

Ralph and I had been on our way up to Sturgeon Bay to bring back a robbery suspect wanted for questioning in Milwaukee. We had taken the lake-shore route, occasionally straying to parallel county roads for a closer view of the lake, and it had been on one of these that our car broke down.

© 1981 by Jack Ritchie.

We had lifted the hood, gazed with ignorant wondering eyes at the contents thereunder, and Ralph had uttered words which were not a benediction.

We had been debating the merits of walking north or south, or splitting and covering both directions in search of a phone, when the Mercedes appeared and pulled to a stop beside us.

The woman inside—raven-haired and perhaps in her late twenties—rolled down the window on the passenger side. "In trouble?"

"Madam," I admonished, "it is not a wise practice for a woman traveling alone to stop on a secluded road to speak to absolute strangers."

"Shut up, Henry," Ralph suggested. We identified ourselves, Ralph explained our predicament, and we soon found ourselves in the back seat of the Mercedes.

She drove perhaps a half mile through the wood-bordered road and then turned in at a gatehouse. There followed another quarter mile over a graveled road through more trees until we broke into a clearing and saw an oval driveway behind which waited a French Norman edifice large enough to cause Ralph to remove the cigar stub from his mouth and stare.

Inside, at the first phone, Ralph had consulted the local telephone directory and made a call to a garage in Kewaunee. He gave pinpoint directions regarding the spot at which our car could be found.

Andrea Whitcomb—her name matched her beauty—then drove us back to our vehicle. She elected to wait until we were safely picked up.

"Police detectives?" she had asked.

Ralph nodded. "Give Henry the facts and a little room to theorize and he raises up a storm."

I blushed modestly. "I do try."

The tow truck, with the driver and his aide in its cab, arrived after twenty minutes. The two of them gazed down at the engine of our car, palpated here and there, and concurred that nothing could be done on the spot. The car would have to be towed to Kewaunee.

Since there was no room in the truck cab, Ralph and I faced the prospect of being towed to Kewaunee while seated in our vehicle canted at a forty-degree angle.

"Why don't you stay overnight at my place?" Andrea had offered. "I'll drive you to Kewaunee when your car is repaired."

I demurred. "I'm certain that Ralph and I can find a motel."

Ralph took me aside. "Henry, my wife will kill me if she finds out

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that we turned down an invite like this. I'll bet the place has a dozen bathrooms."

And so we had found ourselves back at Andrea's home where we had a light supper and then adjourned to the terrace—Ralph with a bottle of cold beer, I with a glass of sherry, and Andrea with a can of diet soda.

The sun set, a gibbous moon rose, and we had a fine view of our freshwater ocean when Andrea finally commenced to tell us about the murder.

"It happened four years ago."

"And the victim?"

"My father. He was stabbed with a fish-filleting knife. He lived long enough to use a tenpenny nail to scratch all twenty-six letters of the alphabet on the plank flooring of the boathouse."

"Boathouse?"

"Yes. That's where he was killed. You can't see it from here, but it's down there at the foot of the bluffs. The flooring is waterproofed with a battleship-gray paint and the letters were quite clear."

I pondered. "All the letters of the alphabet? Upper case, lower case, or mixed?"

"All upper case. Capitals."

"Were any of the letters significantly different in size from the others?"

"No. Just plain block printing."

"Were any missing? Or repeated?"

"Each and every one of them appeared just once and in the proper alphabetical order."

"Was there any punctuation between the letters? Commas, dashes, semicolons?"

"Nothing." But then she thought that over. "There *was* a period after the letter Z."

"Ah, ha," I said significantly.

"Ah ha what?" Ralph asked.

"I don't know yet, Ralph, but the pieces are beginning to fall into place."

I returned to Andrea. "If your father didn't die immediately, why didn't he shout for help?"

"Possibly he did. But the boathouse is some distance from here and at the water's edge. Our lake surf can be every bit as noisy as the ocean at times and if he called, he wasn't heard. And evidently he didn't have the strength to make it all the way back up to the

house. I suppose he decided that the only thing remaining was to leave some kind of message pointing to his murderer, but no one has been able to figure out what that message might be."

"I assume the police found no fingerprints on the knife?"

"None. They think the prints were wiped off with a rag found near the body."

"Did your father have a pen or pencil on his person?"

"No."

I made a steeple with my fingertips and gazed over it wisely. "So here's our problem. If the victim knew the identity of his killer, why didn't he simply indicate that knowledge by scratching that name on the planking? And if he did *not* know the identity of the murderer—assuming it was someone whom he'd never seen before—why couldn't he have etched something to that effect on the planking? Why, instead, did he choose to spend the last moments of his life laboriously scratching all the letters of the alphabet? Did the police have any suspects?"

"They suspected everybody, I suppose. An intruder—who might have been surprised while attempting to steal something from the boathouse—the servants, and all of us in the house just prior to the murder."

"Who were the latter?"

"Helmuth McCarthy, my husband Cyril, and myself."

"Who is Helmuth McCarthy?"

"Helmuth's parents live just down the road. The next place. Helmuth and I were practically raised together. He always intended to marry me, but somehow Cyril came along and preempted."

"Would he have had any motive for wishing your father dead?"

"Absolutely none."

"And was the same true of your husband, Cyril?"

"No. Let me put it this way. My father had a great deal of money and property. It did not necessarily follow, however, that I had access to any large part of it, as my husband discovered soon after he married me. Father controlled the purse strings—though Cyril and I did not exactly live in poverty—and that control was tight. It was further aggravated by the fact that my father had absolutely no use for Cyril."

She elaborated. "Cyril was a tennis bum when I met him and hardly much more than that after our marriage. He was a terrific dancer, could water ski, but couldn't look anybody straight in the eye. In short, Father didn't like him from the word go."

"Why in the world did you marry Cyril?"

"I'm not at all certain now. Possibly it was some sort of juvenile revolt against parental discipline. You know, shake up the old man. At the time though it seemed like a good idea."

"So the only way your husband could get his hands on your father's money was if you inherited it?"

"That's about it."

I smiled thinly. "On the other hand, isn't it also possible that you yourself might have murdered your father for basically the same reason—to get hold of his money?"

Ralph poured more beer into his glass. "So you carried an oar over your shoulder?"

I blinked at the interruption. "For about three hours, Ralph. Until the campus police arrested me." Then I re-focused my mind to Andrea's problem: her father had been murdered, but before he had died, he had scratched the letters of the entire alphabet—upper case—on the planking of the boathouse floor. What the devil did that mean?

"How did it all start, Henry?" Ralph asked.

"What start?"

"The oar, Henry."

I sighed. "Oh, that. Well, one day I was sitting in my dormitory room learning how to smoke a pipe, when I walked Charley Swenson. Charley was a big man on the campus and also the equipment manager for the hockey team. I used to nod to him whenever we passed, but this was the first time he'd ever actually spoken to me.

"I don't remember how the talk got around to it, but Charley maintained that our university was so sophisticated that a man could walk around the campus with an oar on his shoulder and not one soul would condescend to ask why. Well, naturally I took exception to that. Our university was certainly sophisticated—four of our pompon girls were members of the Mensa society—but oar-carrying was just a step beyond. The next thing I knew Charley had bet me five dollars that I could carry that oar all day long and not get asked even once. Naturally I took the bet."

"Naturally."

"I had expected an ordinary rowboat oar, or maybe even a canoe paddle, but it turned out that Charley wanted me to carry a sculling oar. They're twelve feet long, you know."

"He just happened to have one on him?"

"It was lying out there in the hall, Ralph. I'd never noticed it

before and Charley said he didn't know how it had gotten there, but as long as it was, we might as well use it."

But I was digressing from my murder case. I turned to Andrea. "What time of day did the murder occur?"

"The coroner put it at between eleven and twelve P.M."

"And what occurred at the house in the evening hours before your father's death?"

"Nothing much. The four of us—Helmuth, Cyril, my father, and I—played bridge until about ten. Then Father went down to the boathouse. He said that one of the boat motors had been giving him trouble and he wanted to take another look at it. Actually he just liked to putter around with the boat and one excuse was as good as another. Whenever he went down there, he usually stayed for hours."

"Then all of you knew that he had gone down to the boathouse and that very likely he would be down there for some time? And what did the rest of you do after your father left?"

"Helmuth went home. My husband decided to have another drink and read the evening paper. The sports pages, of course. And I went upstairs to bed. I fell asleep immediately."

"This Helmuth McCarthy," I said. "Are you positive he left the grounds? Might he not have remained lurking about?"

"I doubt it. Besides, as I said, he had absolutely no motive for my father's murder."

I smiled grimly. "He had no motive of which we are as yet aware. Did the police come to any conclusion?"

"They gave Cyril and me a bad time, but neither of us confessed. I would say that the case is still open in their books."

I delicately put the question. "Do you sleep in a king-size or queen-size bed?"

"One of twin beds."

"Ah, and you say that you went to sleep immediately? Did your husband do the same when he came up?"

"How would I know that if I was asleep?"

She had a point there. However I pressed. "Actually either one of you could have been feigning sleep. One could have waited until the other fell asleep and then sneaked down to the boathouse, killed your father, and sneaked back to the bedroom with no one the wiser, except the victim."

She smiled faintly. "Have you considered that my husband could have *collaborated* on the murder?"

I shook my head. "No. If the two of you *had* collaborated, I'm

certain you would have had the sense to provide each other with mutually substantiated alibis. No, the murder was committed by one person and the prime suspects are you, your husband, and this mysterious Helmuth McCarthy."

I pondered. A minute passed and then I sat up. "By Jove, I think I've got it."

"Got what?" Andrea asked.

"The alphabet *in itself* contains no message, but *of itself* it is the message."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Your father scratched the entire alphabet once—finishing with the period to indicate that he had said as much as was necessary—in order to show that he was physically capable of naming his murderer, but that he didn't think that it was *wise* to do so."

"In heaven's name, why not?"

I smiled tightly. "Because he knew that, in the course of things to come, the murderer *himself* would be the person who officially 'discovered' the body the next morning. And while playing the role of the 'discoverer' what would that murderer have done had he also found his name etched so accusingly on the planks of the boathouse?"

Andrea cooperated. "He would have destroyed the scratches somehow. He might even have burned down the boathouse to cover up his tracks."

"Exactly. But he did not burn down the boathouse or deface the scratchings. And why not? Because he saw no reason to believe that the alphabet threatened him in any way. Perhaps he even assumed that the letters were simply a kind of mindless hysterical reaction to approaching death. But what your father was actually telling us is that the person who 'discovered' the body is really the murderer." I rubbed my hands. "Now, who 'discovered' the body?"

"I did," Andrea said.

Ralph took me out of earshot. "Henry, what the hell are you doing?"

"I thought it was obvious. I am solving a murder."

Ralph looked back to where Andrea sat staring thoughtfully into space. "Henry, we're *guests* here."

I was a bit shocked. "Ralph, what does that have to do with it?"

He tried another tack. "I mean, what real concrete *proof* do you have that she killed her father?"

"The proof will follow, Ralph. It lies there waiting to be deduced."

"Look, Henry, this isn't our turf. Why don't we just get us a good

night's sleep, a nice breakfast tomorrow morning, and *then* when we leave, we can always drop in at the sheriff's office and tell him all about your deductions. After all, if this murder is four years old, what difference does one more night make anyway? Relax. Enjoy."

Ralph led me back to our chairs.

He chuckled pointedly. "So you carried that oar over your shoulder?"

I roused myself. "Yes. Outdoors it wasn't really too difficult, Ralph, but I had a perfect class-attendance record and I wasn't going to spoil that just because I was carrying an oar. The really tricky part was going up and down winding stairways. It took quite some maneuvering, I tell you."

"And nobody asked you why you were carrying that damn oar? Not even the professors?"

"Nobody, Ralph. Nobody. Anyway it all ended at two thirty in the afternoon when the campus police arrested me."

"What for? Disorderly conduct?"

"No. For stealing an oar. They took me to the Dean of Men. He was in really quite a good mood and he told me that he'd let me off this time if I'd just write 'I will never steal a sculling oar again' five thousand times. It took me the whole weekend because I have a slow handwriting, and I missed the state convention of the Crossword Puzzleteers which was being held in Sheboygan that year."

I studied Andrea keenly. "Is your husband home?"

She came out of her reverie. "No."

"Where is he?"

"Dead and buried."

I waited.

"One evening about a month after Dad was murdered, Cyril tumbled off the precipice. The police came to the conclusion that he must have accidentally slipped while taking a stroll in the moonlight."

I raised a questioning eyebrow. "And where were *you* when this accident occurred?"

"Inside the house playing Monopoly with Helmuth."

"Helmuth McCarthy?"

"The very same. The three of us began the game, but my husband made some bad investments and lost everything he had. He went for a walk while Helmuth and I continued to battle it out. Eventually I won. When I noticed that Cyril hadn't come back from his walk, we went out looking for him and found his body down there at the foot of the cliff."

Once again I smiled grimly. "And I suppose that during this Monopoly shootout, neither you nor Helmuth left the board for any reason? I'd like to have a word with Helmuth McCarthy."

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"He's dead."

I blinked. "Him too?"

"Yes. An airplane accident." She smiled and changed the subject. "It's really a beautiful night. Why don't just you and I take a little stroll around the grounds?"

I balked. "Not near any damn precipice."

"We'll take the stairs down to the beach. Can you swim?"

"Like an otter."

"I'll show you the alphabet. It's still there."

I yielded to the temptation and rose. "Ralph, I want you to bear witness that when I left here, I was alive."

Andrea and I traversed about twenty yards of the back lawn before I said, "On the other hand, if I had been the murderer and 'discovered' the body and the alphabet, I would have realized instantly that an attempt had been made to convey *some* kind of message. Even if I couldn't decipher the message, perhaps someone *else* could and that would prove my undoing. Therefore, just to be on the safe side I would have burned down the boathouse. But you didn't. Why not?"

We walked a bit more before she spoke. "You didn't ask me what time I discovered the body."

"What time did you discover the body?"

"At a little after 3:30 A.M."

I mused on that. "3:30 A.M.? That seems like a rather odd time of the day to discover a body. Why were you up at that hour?"

"Because that's when the alarm clock rang."

"At 3:30 A.M.?"

"Yes. My husband and my father had made an arrangement to go out onto the lake to fish for Coho in the morning. Actually my husband wasn't all that keen about fishing, but he was just trying to butter up Dad. They were going to get up before dawn, meet in the boathouse, and Dad would take the boat out so that they could be at the right spot when the sun rose.

"When the alarm went off at 3:30 A.M., Cyril got up and went to the bathroom for his shower. He always showered before starting the day, no matter what the time. And I, when I'm awakened in the middle of the night, always find it difficult to get back to sleep. So

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this time, while Cyril was in the bathroom, I got up and dressed. I decided that I might as well see Cyril and Father off onto the lake and maybe even join them. I walked down to the boathouse, found it lit up, and discovered the body."

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"Hm," I said, reaching a conclusion. "I see it all now. In the previous evening, after you went upstairs to bed, your husband finished his drink and the sports page and then decided to stroll down to the boathouse to speak to your father privately. Did he have murder in mind? I doubt it, since a premeditated murder would have been more safely planned. No, he went to the boathouse to talk. Perhaps to borrow money or to renegotiate the monetary aspects of your marriage."

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"Your father proved stubborn, perhaps abusive, and words were exchanged. Your husband, losing his temper, picked up the nearest weapon, which happened to be the fish fillet knife, and struck. Then, realizing that his only chance to get away with the killing was simply to go back to the house and try to bluff it through, he went to bed and set the alarm to ring at 3:30 A.M. Perhaps he even slept."

"When the alarm rang, he pursued the routine course expected of him and went to the bathroom to shower, after which he intended to go down to the boathouse and 'innocently discover' the body, proving my theory about the message on the boathouse floor—that whoever 'discovered' the body is really the murderer. What he didn't anticipate was that this particular morning you would decide to get up and go down to the boathouse while he was taking his shower."

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I now speculated. "This accurately accounts for your father's death, but what of your husband's? Do you still maintain that it was an accident, or did you solve the message of the alphabet and decide to take justice into your own hands? On the night of Cyril's death, didn't you excuse yourself from the Monopoly board on the pretext that you had a headache and wanted to go upstairs for some aspirins, but instead sneaked out of the house and expertly nudged your husband over the cliff?"

"Not exactly," Andrea said. "In the first place I didn't have the faintest idea what the alphabet meant until you told me a few minutes ago. Which means that I never really did suspect my husband of killing Father. I didn't think he was capable of murder. I thought that it must have been some intruder who had been caught in the act of stealing something from the boathouse."

"And as for the night of my husband's death I did once excuse myself from the Monopoly game—though not because of a headache."

However, while I was upstairs in my bathroom, Helmuth McCarthy took that opportunity to go outside and push Cyril off the cliff."

I stared at her. "How do you know that's what happened?"

"Because Helmuth told me."

"Good heavens, woman. Why didn't you take that information to the police?"

"Because Helmuth didn't tell me until he was dying and by then it was too late to do anything and it wouldn't have made any difference except to cause harm to Helmuth's memory and his parents."

She elucidated. "Helmuth's light plane crashed while taking off from our local airport. It rammed into the underside of an executive jet that was just landing. The jet landed safely, but Helmuth didn't. He was rushed to the hospital still alive, but it was obvious—even to Helmuth—that he wasn't going to make it. So he asked to see me and he told me what he'd done."

"What motive could he have had for killing your husband?"

"One of the oldest. He figured that with Cyril gone, I was bound to marry him next." She sighed. "If you absolutely insist on having witnesses to his confession, you might consult his parents. They were there at the bedside. But I really don't see any point in making all this public now, do you? Everybody concerned seems to be dead. Why don't you just quietly file this case away in your memory file?"

I reflected morosely that my memory file was chockful of cases like that. Oh, well, perhaps there was room for one more.

We took the wooden stairs down to the base of the bluff.

"So nobody at all asked you why you were carrying that oar?"

"Nobody."

"You mean that even after all these years you still don't know that the whole campus had been—" She stopped.

"Been what?"

"Never mind. I just don't have the heart to tell you."

I sighed. "Somehow old Charley got hold of all those sentences I'd written for the dean and he used them to paper two walls of his dorm room. Then he asked me if I would write 'I will never steal a sculling oar again' five thousand times more so that he could paper the other two walls."

She stared at me. "My God, you *didn't*?"

"No. I still don't quite understand it, but something snapped and I knocked out four of Charley's front teeth. He never did speak to me again and he even redecorated his room."

It was really quite a beautiful evening and we walked out to the end of the pier to study the stars.

Andrea informed me that there were just dozens of local murders waiting for someone to solve them and finally I promised to come back the next weekend, even if Ralph couldn't make it.

When Andrea and I got back to the house, we found Ralph inside watching television.

He took me aside. "Nine bathrooms, and I didn't even get up to the servants' quarters."

The maid brought him another bottle of beer, and me a glass of sherry.



NEXT ISSUE . . .

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